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STATEMENT

**Testimony to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Task Force on
Prescription Drug Importation**

May 6, 2004

Surgeon General Carmona, Dr. McClellan and members of the Task Force on Prescription Drug Importation, thank you for the opportunity to appear today and discuss this very important issue.

As youngsters, you may have played the game, "Red Rover". If you did, you will recall the refrain of the game is "red rover, red rover, send Johnny or Susie right over!"

Task force members, I hope you're hearing the refrain of the American people. They're chanting: "FDA rover, FDA rover, allow affordable, safe prescription drugs to come over!"

By now, you are familiar with the arguments for and against reimportation of prescription medicines. I will spare you another complete rehash of those arguments.

However, a few points are worth emphasizing:

1. There's a prescription drug crisis in America.
2. The recently passed Medicare bill, while helpful, will not entirely meet the need for more access to affordable prescription medicines.
3. The American consumer pays way more for most brand name prescription medicines than consumers in the rest of the world. That's not fair.
4. Our drug companies treat the American consumer the way they do because we let them. That must stop.

One way to begin the process of reforming world prescription drug pricing is to allow importation of safe prescription medicines into the United States. At this point, the main objection to that idea is safety. I don't purport to be a medical, technical or pharmaceutical expert. However, I know this: licensed, established, credible, and reputable pharmacies in Canada appear to be as safe as their counterparts in the United States. As applied to those types of pharmacies, the safety concern seems to disappear. I agree that the Internet features less than reputable characters promoting and distributing less than reputable products. We are not proposing to conduct business with such entities. That point gets lost in the debate repeatedly. We are proposing to do business only with licensed, established, credible, and reputable pharmacies in Canada and perhaps elsewhere. We should also be clear of what we mean by "safety concerns." Minor differences in labeling should not be cited as "safety concerns".

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As to the issue of safety, it is simply implausible that the best and brightest in our country cannot devise a safe system to import safe prescription medicines from reputable entities in other countries. We are a country of innovation and “can-do” spirit. Developing systems to safely import prescription medicines from a country like Canada is within our reach.

This is a country that just landed two rovers on Mars. Those rovers, each roughly the size of a Ford Focus, traveled 303 million miles at an average speed of 12,000 miles per hour, and landed within two billionths of a percent of their landing target.

In a little over an hour, you can drive from Thunder Bay, Ontario to Grand Marais, Minnesota. Please don’t tell me there’s no way to move a bottle of pills safely between the two.

You can have breakfast in Bangkok, lunch in Singapore and dinner in Sydney, pay with a credit card, and get an itemized, error free bill at home, in U.S. dollars, within 28 days.

And when it comes to ways to safely run a mail-order pharmacy, we’ve already done it. The federally-funded, federally-administered and federally-regulated Veterans’ Hospital in Minneapolis fills hundreds of mail-order prescriptions each day and gets them safely to people’s homes. The methodology and safety protocols are there. It just needs to be expanded geographically. We can do that.

When President John F. Kennedy challenged Americans to put a man on the moon by the end of the 1960’s, did the best and brightest in our country say, “Sorry, Mr. President, it just can’t be done”?

That same level of determination and energy that met President Kennedy’s challenge needs to be put to the task of finding a way to ensure Americans of safe, affordable prescription medicines. This task force can be the beginning of that effort. It can be done. The real question: do you want it to happen? The Congress and the American people are counting on you. Please don’t shrink from the task. Our faith, trust and hope are in you.

Thank you very much.